

AT A GLANCE



Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan; photo: J. M. Upton

Thoughts Concerning Integration and the ‘Art’ of the History of Art: An Advisory Guide

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“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.”

Albert Einstein
The World as I see It

Contemplative Beholding and ‘Art’ of the History of Art: An Advisory Guide to an Integrated Concentration

At Amherst College the Department of Art and the History of Art offers three distinct Concentrations: “The Practice of Art” based in the studio and two Concentrations based in the discipline of art history, including “ ‘Art’ of the History of Art” and “Historical and Cultural Studies.” The on-line Homepage of the Department of Art and the History of Art describes the ‘Art’ of the History of Art as follows:

‘Art’ of the History of Art aims to integrate a rigorous grounding in both the disciplines of art history and studio practice.¹ Rigorous grounding in studio practice means a working knowledge of two-dimensional form, three-dimensional form and color. In art history it means a working knowledge of pre-modern and modern art in the West, African or Asian art.² The goal of this Concentration is to identify the power of ‘art’ within its historical, cultural, theoretical and material presence in the world. This shared goal may be met through courses individually selected by each participating student in consultation with their advisor in this Concentration. Since this is an open Concentration, there is no upper limit on the number or combination of courses that students might take within and outside the department. As a guide, however, the normal expectation is a minimum of one course focusing on each of the specific areas in studio practice and art history that are designated above, along with two advanced courses in art history to assure explicit awareness of art historical method and purpose. This Concentration assumes the completion of a total of 10 courses or 12 if the student pursues an honors project.

¹ See Amherst College on-line Homepage, Department of Art and the History of Art, “linked” with the word “integrated.”

² To avoid any confusion: All work in the practice of art for this Concentration in the Department of Art and the History of Art will be completed with faculty who are practicing artists; in art history with faculty who are art historians. Extended work may be with any faculty at the College and elsewhere.

Contemplative beholding from an ontological perspective

This advisory guide for students interested in the ‘Art’ of the History of Art represents the views of its author. Although it shares a general approach to the History of Art with two other advisors in this Concentration, Professors Abiodun and Staller, its specific aim, which is to define ‘contemplative beholding’ as one particular basis for artistic awareness and experience, is my own. Toward this end, the instructional purpose of this guide is to re-orient our attention away from habitual and predominantly exterior or ‘distanced’ observation, production and consumption of works of art and encourage direct experiential involvement with the ‘art’ of works of art through an integrated intersection of our multiple capacities for knowing and action. From within this threshold of a deliberately focused ontological perspective, the educational goal of this guide is to re-imagine a ‘contemplative beholding’ that might reclaim the ‘art’ of art, diminished by a now long-standing tradition of artistic estrangement caused by verbal and scientific objectification born in the exclusive ratiocination of all reality.

It is the conclusion of this advisory guide that the purposeful academic integration of the distinct discipline of the practice of art and the equally distinct discipline of art history offers a particularly effective deep interdisciplinary means of approaching an artistic awareness that will inform acts of ‘art’ that emerge at the core of moral behavior and that comprise a genuinely artful life. From the vantage point of a fully embodied mind that includes the eye and the hand, this ‘art’ corresponds to the physiological reality of the dynamically integrated left and right hemispheres of our human brain and body. This ‘art’ amounts to a human aspiration in which contradiction itself illuminates the “mysterious” that allows us to “wonder” and “marvel” and without which we are “as good as dead, and [our] eyes are dimmed.”

Re-orientation

“Man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being”
(Vaclav Havel, 1994)

“I approached the task of destroying images by first tearing them out of the heart through God’s Word and making them worthless and despised....For when they are no longer in the heart, they can do no harm when seen with the eyes.” (Martin Luther, 1525)

These two comments concerning our capacity to behold bracket an era in which the discipline of art history and modern technology have evolved as instruments of observation that have made more art of more varied means, forms and styles accessible to more people in more places than at any time in history. Anyone of us, with a few key strokes of a computer, can “download” more of Rembrandt van Rijn’s artistic work in a single moment and place than he himself could ever have seen. This calling forth of works of art of every medium and date from around the globe can be repeated endlessly. Contemporary textbooks and countless illustrated publications only amplify this catalogue of images on demand, even as many of us may find ourselves remarkably empty before actual works of art, left grasping for more and still more information about and the interpreted meaning of the object rather than contemplating quietly with the human significance embodied in it. For, missing from this vast second-hand, virtually

obsessive relationship with art is an accompanying means of experiencing much of anything beyond the surface of transitory realities. Having thus been torn from the heart and moved into the museums of objective observation, art that might have been the realization of our immanent wholeness has become little more than sumptuous distraction from lingering despair.

As an art historian concerned not only with art's long and varied past, but with the living 'art' of that art whose history we seek to articulate, I have turned increasingly to contemplative practice for two reasons. First, disciplined contemplation provides the most effective calming and focusing preparation for any full encounter with complex works of art. Second, the very act of contemplation, on reflection, is itself the explicit embodiment of being that animates art within a genuinely abundant awareness of wholeness beyond limitation. From this perspective, contemplative practice amounts to a radical reclaiming of art at its human core. It offers the behavioral preparation and attitude for the artistic action of constructing those intimations of reconciliation of the contradictory possibilities conscious being entails that comprise our human threshold of beholding.

In this act of beholding, contemplative practice serves as a quieting and focusing complement to substantive learning, but it may also become the very basis of an active way of knowing that will reveal cognitive possibilities otherwise obscured by the conventions of 'scientific' knowing. This contemplative beholding offers a new (or very old!) perceptual threshold in which the 'art' of art might emerge. Rather than define art as an object one would seek to possess by way of ownership, interpretation, or even analytical understanding, this beholding imagines 'art' to be an act of aspiration, that is, a verb before it is the noun of our familiar experience. Drawing on a fundamental psychological impulse we all share, but may have forgotten, this beholding challenges the potentially estranged voyeurism of merely looking at or objectively measuring works of art and resists our habitual stance of neutral, disembodied, and essentially iconoclastic observation that so often results in the meaningless collection of things, mechanical information and empty gestures. For in the recognition and acceptance of a paradoxical tension between self-conscious separation and dynamic involvement in the world, we might re-discover within ourselves precisely that profound reconciliatory longing (*erôs*) we possess at least from birth, and that animates artistic imagination and action, even as it informs our capacity for enduring insight.

By setting the explicit goal of learning how, through a disciplined and particularized attitude and procedure, to engage this artistic impulse both in ourselves and as it is embodied in a given work of art, we may re-discover a living 'art' that would revive the embalmed bodies of a museum-deadened world. This contemplative return to a place and presence within the thrall of an art work's 'art' might actually allow us once again both to encounter and to construct for ourselves those intimations of reconciliation among the countless contradictory realities of human being that will incarnate meaning in our lives and bridge the infinite chasm of solitude and compassion.

In short, from an ontological perspective, our explicit human purpose is to reanimate our experience of art. Implicitly however, our purpose is to reclaim contemplative knowing itself, as a non-ecclesiastical and yet fully spiritual act of love that might recharge our human aspiration to know true rather than counterfeit wholeness from an acknowledged condition of unalterable fragmentation and limitation. Rather than the discovery of just another cognitive tool in an otherwise unchanged academic enterprise, this contemplative knowing, embedded in an 'art' of beholding, might offer some small measure of artistic re-integration and reunion in a world of

loneliness and, perhaps, a fleeting vision of peace in the face of irreconcilable contradiction, conflict and mortality. As an instrument of psychological, if not also social and political, not to mention scientific reality, this contemplatively based beholding might open a way to Vaclav Havel's dream of approaching an elusive blending of self and transcendence. If nothing else, 'contemplative beholding' as a deliberate, but gentle, mechanism for seeking out and realizing palpable intimations of reconciliation might help us try to recover some sense of belonging with each other, the world and the universal mystery of our being as it is known in the deepest place of our solitude. Having thus re-entered the threshold of our full human being, we might again be able to say what Goethe's Dr. Faustus was unable to say, "Tarry a moment, Thou art so fair" and in that reawakening re-discover our profoundest well-being.

Contemplative Beholding and the 'Art' of the History of Art

My own work and teaching in the Concentration called the 'Art' of the History of Art draws on particular educational principles that underlie the general goals of artistic integration, human transformation and vision that 'contemplative beholding' will reveal. The following is a working summary of these principles and goals as I understand them.

General Educational Principles

- Openness, inclusiveness, and aspiration to push beyond one's existing limitations.
- Willingness to embrace difference, variation and contradiction.

Particular Educational Principles

- Focused and open attention as integral to artistic awareness.
- Artistic awareness as a vital component of our daily existence, society and culture.
- Artistic awareness in which 'art' is both verb and noun.
- Acceptance of a common ground of integrated disciplinary learning, knowledge and skill.
- Intellectual and experiential collaboration between the academic disciplines of the practice of art and art history as a basis of a fully informed encounter with 'art.'
- 'Art' and artistic awareness as the conscious embodiment of contradictory possibilities, including spatial, visual and verbal, as well as rational/analytical and trans-rational understanding and experience.
- Collaboration in the pursuit of individual and collective progress toward artistic awareness and attainment.

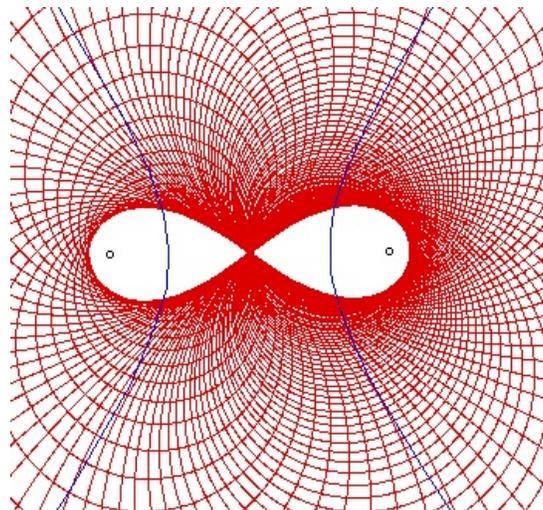
- ‘Art’ as the personal, social and moral act of discovering, animating and fostering an informed encounter with the past and the future as they take shape in the present moment of alert contemplative presence and understanding

Educational Goals:

- The central goal of this Concentration is the ‘art’ of the history of art. Although all of the extrinsic material that surrounds this primary goal is, of course, critical to a full understanding of and an informed response to any work of art, it is the search for the ‘art’ of the work of art that distinguishes this Concentration. In acknowledging and pursuing the formal, cultural and contextual circumstances of works of art, our purpose is not to beg (i.e., avoid) the key question of the art work’s ‘art’ nor hesitate in our full encounter with it.
- Accordingly, the prime question for this Concentration, the one that is often taken for granted, is directly: What is ‘art,’ whose history we would dare to seek and whose mysterious reality we would dare to engage? This question is the elusive but wonderful reality that is the point of our departure and return. There is a vast verbal guide to this question, starting with Plato and Aristotle, continuing in medieval and renaissance writing on art and coming forward into our own era through Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, Emmanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard and others in the West; Matsuo Bashō, Jalal al-Din Muhammed Bali-Rumi and others in the East and the oral tradition that includes the deity named Oshun in the African experience. In the end, however, our question is neither verbal nor philosophical, it is embodied: first, within ourselves (both rationally and analytically as well as sensually and emotionally); second, within the very fabric and experience of the work of art; third, within the human cultures of which we are an integral part. As an overarching goal of human longing, this artistic awareness challenges us to become attentive to the forgotten presence of the 17th Odu.
- Toward this end, this Concentration offers and encourages an open curriculum built around the deliberate intersection and mutual support of both the discipline of the practice of art and the discipline of art history that might animate human collaboration.
- This Concentration embraces the idea that ‘art’ is multifaceted: it is an attitude of reverent being, a devoted act of aspiration and only finally an object. Taken together this attitude, act and object seek to re-integrate what reason separates and offer occasions in which we may behold intimations of wholeness.
- The task each of us faces and that ‘contemplative beholding’ will serve is the endless search in our lives to construct or to find in others’ constructions those intimations of reconciliation of the contradictory realities all conscious existence entails - namely ‘art’- that will render our shared mortal condition not only tolerable, but meaningful, at times beautiful and, occasionally, graceful.

Contemplative Beholding and the 'Art' of the History of Art as **lemniscate**:

Like the photograph of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, the lemniscate diagram below provides a visual equivalent of the integral relation between the knowledge and practice of the language of form on the one hand and the knowledge and practice of the discipline of art history on the other. Together these two disciplines reinforce and enlarge each other as academic means for an ever deepening and widening contemplative encounter with the transcendent imaginal reality called 'art' and its history in the world across time, geography and cultures. In this diagram, let the small white circle on the left represent the practice of art (2 and 3 dimensional form and color) and the small white circle on the right represent the discipline of art history (pre-modern and modern art in the West, Asian and African art). The central intersection marks the source of all 'art' and its animation in our individual and collective awareness of human longing for wholeness from our acknowledged condition of mortal limitation and separation. Let the expanding circular lines be relational resonance that would foster cultures of peace and diminish destructive cultures of war.



At A GLANCE

The following schematic model of a sample trajectory through the ‘Art’ of the **History of Art** is intended to give a general overview of possible course distributions and movement toward individual and collective educational growth, transformation and artistic awareness. This schematic model should be read from the bottom up ▲. [See next page...](#)

